

Respect for Life as the Primary Basis for A Sound Philosophy of Religion

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The subject of my sermon to you today is **Respect for Life as the true basis for a sound Philosophy of Religion**. Very much more, it should indeed be the basis for **a sound Philosophy of Life**. This, I insist, must exist both at private individual level as well as at collective public level. I maintain that this, and **this alone, entitles men and women to be worthy leaders of their fellow beings**. Nay, even simply to occupy a place in their midst.

As Buddhists we have had in this country more than twenty-three centuries of recorded history. This is quite a considerable length of time. But what has happened during the last century, including two world wars, the second being more ghastly and destructive than the first, makes us wonder whether the world has been created with any purposeful sense or sanity. "Wither mankind? " we are compelled to ask. Or "Whose cause are we serving, of god or man? " could also be a reasonable query.

Wars in the west and wars in the east, and wars in our midst right here, have made us shudder. Causes of these wars, when historically viewed, have been in most cases no more than racial prejudices. When one examines them more closely and precisely, they turn out to be imaginary and exaggerated notions of ethnic rights and ethnic supremacy. The naked truth of this is admittedly another form of barbaric and primitive tribal arrogance. Just refresh your memory in terms of the great Holocaust of World War II, of the brutal massacre of Jews under the Nazi regime.

Today we talk from the threshold of religion. If religions of the world have a

part to play in the name of those above or below, divine or human, we believe they should talk about things right here, i.e. to put the humans on this earth, in proper relation to one another, through a meaningful and purposeful process of evolution. It is not for religions to put into the heads of poor mortals a diabolic sense of race or religious superiority, as being descendants of this or that creed, and charge them into battle array for the propagation, in the name of religion, of their own individual fanaticism across the world.

Both the more organized classical religions of the world as well as newly emerging religious cultic groups seem to be indulging in such activities at a suicidal rate. Some are even known to be declaring that it is incumbent on them to make up for lost time and gather harvests of new converts into their fold before the turn of the century.

It is no secret that at world level many groups seem to have their stakes in this gamble and therefore seem to be alerted against one another and viewing each other with distrust and suspicion. This typhoon-like sweep, seems to be set in motion today in some regions of the eastern world where propagandist investors are expecting to gather rich harvests in the circles of the economically and emotionally handicapped.

Such movements have to be viewed more seriously by the intellectually stabler groups in society. They should take note of the fact that movements of this kind carry with them a serious "**writing on the wall**". The gratification they offer to the converts definitely bears an **exploitative character**. The beneficiaries are ultimately left much poorer, **routed out of their own indigenous cultural moorings** but carrying with them an aggressively enduring mercenary character.

As against these divisive patterns of exploitative religious propaganda, on whichever basis they are carried out, the Buddhist position, in its philosophical vision, has been that life has a unity, irrespective of its assumed-to-be higher or lower grades. Life in the universe, including man and animal and even plant, is

part of the whole ecosystem, each one totally integrated to the other. For their own healthy sustenance, they have to be kept thus bonded together.

Buddhism upholds a creed of loving relationships. Plant life is treated with delicate respect, although no legislation is made in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, binding on lay persons, against its violation. Monks of senior status, however, shall certainly desist from such acts of destruction. As a part of secular ethics, it is addressed even to the layman that no man shall tear away even a branch of a tree under the shadow of which he enjoyed a rest. It is said to be treacherous behavior. This is Buddhist thinking.

*Yassa rukkhassa chāyāya nisīdeyya sayeyya vā
na tassa sākhā bhañjeyya mittadubbho hi pāpako.*

As for the monks, they are required to refrain from dumping any garbage in places where plants grow. In addition to aesthetic considerations, in pursuance of this wholesome attitude to nature, they are barred from all acts of environmental pollution. They are not to physically ease themselves close to sources of water or stretches of grasslands. Further to this, senior monks, i.e. all those who have reached the stage of *upasampanna* are required to keep off from roaming the country side during the rainy season in order to prevent causing damage to germinating young seedlings. This in fact is the origin of today's highly venerated Vassāna Retreat. It is literally a Keep Off the Grass indication.

Thus every Buddhist practitioner necessarily becomes a protector of the environment. He is expected to be lovingly bound to it. Both parties, man and nature, are believed to be benefiting in the process. India of Buddha's day knew of both natural forest tracts as well as man grown ones adjacent to the big cities of the day and were known as *jātavana* [self-grown] and *ropitavana* [man planted]. These were viewed as places of solace and comfort, enriching human life considerably. The Buddha is believed to be speaking very highly of the forest. Monks paying heed to this, are heard saying: Let me to the forest go alone, the

place highly praised by the Buddha - *Handa eko gamissāmi araññaṃ buddhavaṇṇitaṃ*

The finest example of Buddhist thinking, placing man in relation to the entire ecosystem of the universe to which he belongs, is the Buddhist Metta Sutta or more popularly known as the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta. **Its immense value as a basic living philosophy for all mankind is virtually lost to us today by its being reckoned as a powerful protective chant or *paritta*.** Its power, well and truly, lies in **the character transformation** it is expected to bring about in the life of each individual in his or her **relationship to the whole ecosystem around.** As far as life in the universe is considered, such distinctions of grading as human or otherwise, large or small, visibly seen or not, including even those yet to be born, existing in embryonic states, are not to be used as bases of discrimination. They are all to be contained within the frame work of loving kindness. The relevant portion of the sutta runs as:

*Ye keci pāṇabhūtatthi tasā vā thāvarā vā anavasesā
dīghā vā ye mahantā va majjhimā rassakānukathulā
diṭṭhā vā ye' va addiṭṭhā ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre
bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā.*

Whatever living things there be, weak and powerful altogether,
Large or small, massive or minute, seen or unseen, near or far,
Born to life or yet in embryonic stages.
May they all be well and happy.

If any human individual can possibly acquire this infinite range of vision within his or her mental frame or as the sutta itself puts it [*mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ*] include within it all forms and grades of life known to exist, and develop nothing but boundless love and friendly relations towards them [i.e. *mettañca sabbalokasmiṃ mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ*], this is declared to be

the highest mode of living, divinely supreme, for any human being. The sutta calls it *brahma vihāra*.

Let us now take a closer look at this attitude or the quality of mind which the humans are called upon to develop with regard to what exists in the world in which they themselves live. It is called *mettā* and means a 'state of friendliness'. It implies the absence of any thoughts of hostility or ill-will and certainly requires a culture of one's own mind, a grooming of one's attitudes to everything else besides oneself. And this, to the same extent that one loves oneself and is concerned about one's own well-being.

This idea is beautifully contained in the stanza from the Dhammapada [Dhp. v. 130] *attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye*. In doing anything that involves others or has an impact on others, one must first put oneself in the position of the other and consider how one would react in that situation. This philosophy of Buddhism is very convincingly presented in several places in Buddhist texts.

In a delightful conversation with King Pasenadi of Kosala, the Buddha confirms the statement of Queen Mallikā [SN.1.75] that every individual person loves himself or herself more than any other [*Natthi kho me mahārāja koc 'añño attanā piyataro*]. Therefore the inference is that **the person who loves himself or herself should cause no harm to another** [*Tasmā na hiṃse paraṃ attakāmo*]. The Buddhists push this inference almost to the level of an injunction. It is **a solid norm with which every Buddhist is required to regulate his life**.

In counselling the dwellers of Bamboo Gate, i.e. the Brahmin village of Veludvāra SN.V.352], the Buddha uses this same yardstick of **'self - example'** or *attūpanāyikaṃ dhammapariyāyaṃ*. Admonishing those dwellers of Bamboo Gate on the **need of good moral order in society**, of good words and good deeds in relation to one another in our human community, the Buddha insists that those who love their lives and opt to live and do not choose to die [*jīvitukāmo*

amaritukāmo], should also respect the lives of others.

In this sutta, the Buddha extends this consideration of treating the other with respect to many other areas of life like sexual propriety and the right of others to the ownership of their legitimately owned property, as well as to honesty and politeness in speech and abstaining from slander. Thus we have to admit the Buddhist concept of *maitrī* safeguards not only the lives of all living things, but also safeguards the total process of living, together with all accompaniments of life like one's own family, property and sources of pleasure.

This is the typically horizontal concept of love and respect for life, without any indications of higher and lower, whereby one holds oneself as a part of an integrated whole, without any secret pacts as chosen or privileged people. This indeed is the keynote of the Buddhist concept of *maitrī*. It admits of no vertical gradations with special loyalties to one's religion or one's race. That is why we are free to **call it universal loving kindness**.

And such love implies no expectation of returns or rewards, with personal or group interests. *Maitrī* bolsters up the very living process in the world, of man and animal, without any need to look for grace from elsewhere. This sort of love, without a Cupid's arrow piercing through it, is self-protective. It begets life and safeguards life. It is like a mother's love for her only child. The Metta Sutta aptly refers to it as *mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe* - As a mother protects her only child even at the risk of her own life.

This theme that I put forward here, taking it over from the Buddhist concept of developing *maitrī* or universal loving kindness, so as to embrace the entire ecosystem in which we are, is something which has been gaining ground in the west among scientific men. Here is a very highly spoken of scientific book, recently published in North America as late as 1993. Its title is **The Biophilia Hypothesis** and is edited by **Stephen R. Kellert** and **Edward O. Wilson**.

Scott McVay, in his prelude to this book, writes the following which gives a

clear indication of the sensitivity in the world of scientific thinking to the losses we are daily incurring in our living world, primarily due to the lack of love and concern which is contained within our Buddhist concept of *maitrī* referred to earlier and amplified in the Metta Sutta. The note of warning he strikes therein about the disaster the humans are bringing upon themselves through a callous disregard of this relationship is to be adequately and sensitively appreciated. Here is Scott McVay, quoting Edward Wilson.

"The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us." [p. 4].

Then he proceeds to make his own observation:

"Although oft cited and reported, the scale of the unfolding catastrophic loss of many and varied ecosystems through human activity is still only dimly perceived, for the link between the degradation of the biota and the diminishment of the human prospect is poorly understood." [Ibid.].

McVay's severest warning which is not to be dismissed lightly comes in the following.

"Yet until the biophilia hypothesis is more fully absorbed in the science and culture of our times -- and becomes a tenet animating our everyday lives - the human prospect will wane as the rich biological exuberance of this water planet is quashed, impoverished, cut, polluted, and pillaged." [op. cit. p. 5].

In the face of all that has been said from various angles of love, compassion and logical thinking as expressions of respect for life, we believe it is time that Sri Lankans took a few bold steps forward in the direction of Animal Liberation, Vegetarianism and Biophilia Hypothesis. The failure to move quickly in this direction could result in a negation for man of the right to continue to exist on this planet.

As we scan religious and philosophical thought in India during Buddha's time,

we are in a position to acknowledge with pride that we share this honour of offering non-violence to the world with the Jains who boldly declared that it constitutes the highest religious virtue. *Ahiṃsā paramo dharma* was one of their cardinal teachings.

The Buddhists have it as their first precept in the set formula of *pañcasīla*. Its semi-legalised phrasing as *pāṇātipātā veramanī* or abstinence from destruction of life plays a dual role. It primarily safeguards the security of life of all living things. Secondly, it also inculcates the virtue of practicing, directly and positively, compassion and loving kindness towards all that exists along with us.

It is lamentable that both in the current teaching of Buddhism on the one hand, and its day-to-day practice on the other, sufficient stress is not being laid on this second aspect of the positive culture of benevolence. *Mettā bhāvanā* or practice of loving kindness has to be more than mere good wishes for the well-being of others.

The specific instructions in the Buddhist texts about it run as follows. One shall lay aside the instruments of torture and destruction, and shall be endowed with a sense of restraint and compassionate lovingness, and shall dwell with concern for the welfare of all living things [*Nihitadaṇḍo nihitasattho lajjī dayāpanno sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampī viharati*. DN.1. 63].

The cultivation of such a frame of mind for all that lives in this world of ours, as is inculcated in Buddhism, necessarily antedates the modern **biophilia hypothesis** of the scientific world which we discussed above, by more than twenty- five centuries. But with this vast span of time between the birth of Buddhism and our world of today, McVay has still to utter quite aloud and with energetic emphasis the following: **In particular, our understanding of human / animal interactions is still woefully scanty.**

At this stage, let me personally tell you that not being young any more at the

age of eighty two, I can discover a comforting ray of hope coming to this part of the world which would make us rethink on these lines. This time, it beams brighter from Australia. In Melbourne, a young Professor of Bioethics at Monash University, during a delightful get-together we had in his own office, presented to me three books of his own writing, in appreciation for a single volume I offered him. He writes extensively on Animal Liberation and is the president and vice-president of several Animal Societies of Australia and New Zealand. His classic is **Animal Liberation** which was first published in 1975 and republished in Great Britain in 1990.

Now listen, particularly the Sri Lankan Buddhists whose first precept of the *pañcsīla*, i.e. *Pañcāyamaṇī*, is the undertaking to abstain from destruction of life and to **be kind and compassionate towards all living things**. This is what the readers' world thinks of **Peter Singer's Animal Liberation**.

It was the first modern work to argue that those who oppose human suffering must oppose inflicting suffering on animals....Peter Singer showed that meat production is not only ethically indefensible but shamefully wasteful, depriving the world's poor of the protein they need.

His **Save The Animals / 101 Easy Things You Can Do** of 1990 and 1991, co-authored with **Barbara Dover** and **Ingrid Newkirk**, goes more or less as a companion to the former. **Linda McCartney** who writes the Foreword to this excitingly interesting book says:

A long time ago we realized that anyone who cares about the Earth -- really cares - must stop eating animals. The more we read about deforestation, water pollution, and topsoil erosion, the stronger that realization becomes. Expressing her love and concern for animals from yet another angle, this lady goes on to say:

Of course, anyone who cares about animals must stop eating animals. **Just the thought of what happens in a slaughterhouse is enough**. We stopped eating

meat the day we happened to look out of our window during Sunday lunch and saw our young lambs playing happily, as kittens do, in the fields. Eating bits of them suddenly made no sense. In fact, it was revolting.

They are all members of Animal Liberation movements in Australia and the United States. They seem to speak with a depth of conviction and genuineness of feeling. From our part of the world, it is time we learnt to appreciate that the beneficiaries of such thinking and action are the voiceless victims of the animal world. And for that very reason, the undefended and unprotected.

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